

CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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October 27, 2006

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan

Re: Petition to Designate Retaining Wall, 38 Reservoir Street

On October 16, the staff received a petition from 18 Cambridge residents, ¹⁵all of whom are registered voters, requesting that the Commission initiate a landmark designation study of the granite retaining wall that borders the vacant lot at 38 Reservoir Street. This property, lot 98 on Assessors Map 232, contains 14,677 square feet and is assessed at \$1.4 million. I wrote the owner, Hugh Warren of 30 Reservoir Street, to inform him that we had received the petition and requested that he contact me to discuss his plans.

The retaining wall is associated with a reservoir that the Cambridge Water Works, a private company, built in 1855. The City acquired the Water Works in 1867 and more than doubled the size of the structure, building another chamber north of the original one. The retaining wall is associated with this expansion project. The City added a standpipe in 1877, but gained greater capacity and pressure with the completion of the Stony Brook-Payson Park system in 1897. The reservoir was dismantled about 1901 and the entire lot was sold to Mayor Alvin F. Sortwell, who built a large house there. The Sortwell house was taken down in 1948 and three modern houses were built on the site in 1954-58. The Sortwell carriage house exists as the Parents Nursery School, but the remaining lot, which is bordered by the retaining wall, was never built upon.

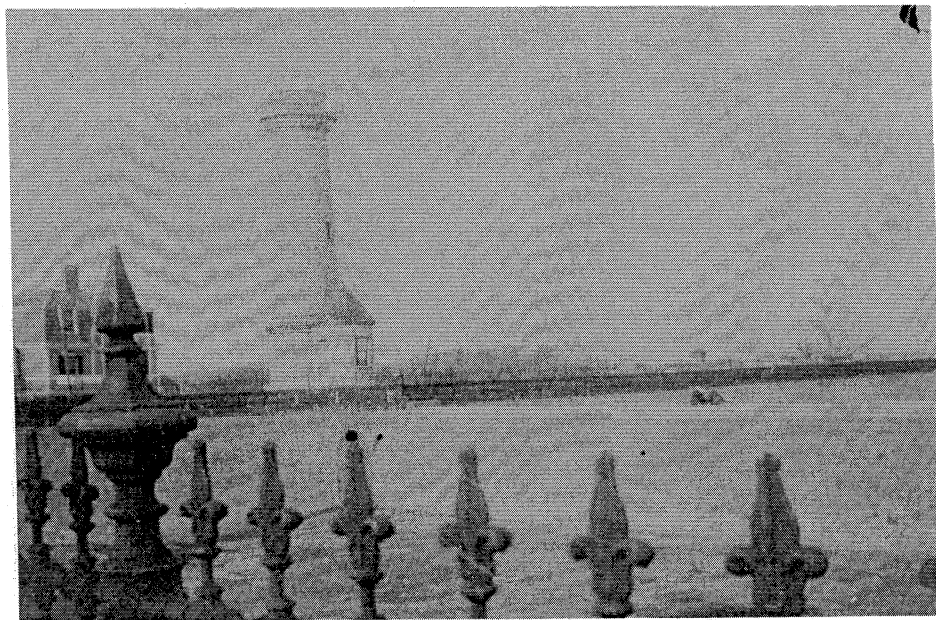
A neighbor alerted me on October 17 that all the trees had been removed from the property and that the owner was preparing to breach the wall for a new driveway. The petition was received a few days later, and on October 24 I met with the owner's landscape architect, Alice Pickman, and some neighbors to discuss Mr. Warren's plans. In the meantime, I discovered that the staff had signed off on Mr. Warren's curb cut application in April 2006, and that the City Council had approved it on September 25.

At the meeting on the 24th Ms. Pickman observed that Mr. Warren had purchased the lot to preempt a developer who intended to build four houses there. He and Ms. Pickman determined that the forest of volunteer trees, mainly Norway maples, was overgrown and dangerous. (Contractors had by that time removed all but one mature tree and all their stumps.) Ms. Pickman's plan included a curving driveway about 30 feet downhill from Mr. Warren's present drive, a 'wildflower meadow,' and new plantings along the perimeter. Mr. Warren could eventually sell this lot for development (although no subdivision plan has been filed).

Mr. Warren confirmed this account in a conversation with me. I asked him to defer altering the wall until after the Commission met on November 2, and informed him that I considered that the Commission might find Ms. Pickman's plan to be appropriate for the site. Mr. Warren observed that he could not take the chance that the Commission would prevent him from going ahead, and the next day, October 26, the contractor breached the wall and began resetting the stones along the driveway.

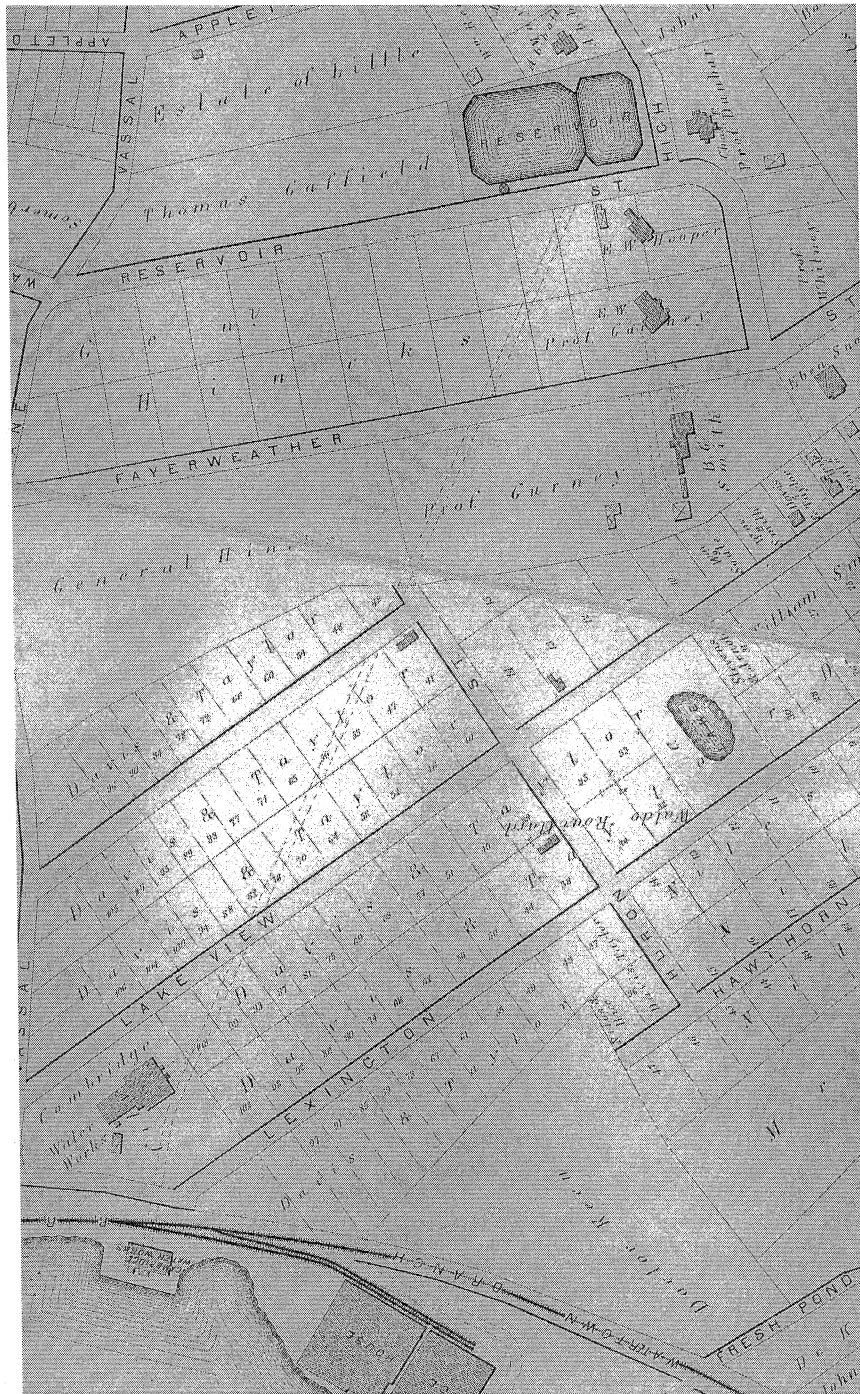
I have placed the neighbors' petition on the agenda of the November 2 meeting of the Historical Commission, and so informed both the petitioners and the owner. If the Commission decides to accept the petition, the remaining part of the wall will be immediately protected until a public hearing can be held at the next meeting on December 2nd. 7.

attachments



Top: Cambridge Reservoir and standpipe, with 27 Reservoir Street at left rear, 1896-97.
Cambridge Historical Society.

Bottom: Highland Street looking east from Reservoir Street, with Reservoir wall at left.
Charles W. Eliot 2nd collection, CHC



Cambridge Reservoir and Pumping Station, 1873. (G. M. Hopkins & Co, *Atlas of Cambridge*, 1873, detail)



Cambridge Tax Atlas (detail)